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SUBJECT: UPDATE OF THAI POLITICAL SITUATION: OPPOSITION
BOYCOTTS, OTHERS JOIN IN

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Alex A. Arvizu, reason 1.4 (b) (d)

1. (C) SUMMARY: Buoyed by news that the opposition will boycott the April 2 election, the demonstrators at Sanam Luang disbanded about 1:30 in the morning on February 28. They gave Prime Minister Thaksin five days to resign, and vowed to return with an even bigger demonstration on March 5, if necessary. Thaksin has tried a more conciliatory tone today to tempt the opposition back into the electoral race, so far without luck. Several labor unions announced that they would join in the next anti-Thaksin demonstrations. TRT is accusing the opposition of 'unconstitutional' actions. End Summary.

2. (U) Early Monday evening, the Democrat, Chart Thai and Mahachon parties finally announced that they would boycott the upcoming snap elections. (These are the three parties besides the ruling Thai Rak Thai (TRT) in the just-dissolved Parliament.) Leaders of the three parties had announced early in the day that they would back away from their threat to boycott if the Prime Minister would commit to their plan for amending the constitution: A special committee of wise and neutral experts, chosen primarily by the Royal Privy Council, would draft a set of constitutional amendments in the six months after the election. These changes would be considered in the Senate and House, and, if approved put to a national referendum. If the PM agreed to this plan, the three opposition leaders and Thaksin would sit down that evening to sign the deal.

3. (SBU) On Monday afternoon, Thaksin gave a half-hearted response, saying that all the political parties, not just those three, should join TRT in discussing this issue. (There are about 30 registered political parties, most of them small organizations). He declined to sign any firm agreement with the opposition, but invited all the parties to send representatives that evening to discuss the reform issue. In all, his proposal fell far short of agreement with opposition's fairly modest demands. Although the three parties were reluctant to boycott, the PM's statement was clearly not an acceptable response.

4. (U) The crowds at Sanam Luang cheered the boycott decision. After an evening of rousing speeches condemning, among other things, the US-Thai Free Trade Agreement negotiations, the protesters marched to the Democracy Monument, to pay tribute to the democracy martyrs. They gave Thaksin a deadline of five days to resign, and they disbanded the demonstration around 1:30 in the morning on Tuesday, with the announcement that they would return on March 5 to continue demonstrating if he had not resigned by then.

5. (U) The two senior-most labor leaders in the country, Somsak Kosaisook and Sirichair Maignam, have urged their supporters to turn out en masse at Sanam Luang on March 5. The Thai Labor Solidarity Committee, which represents the majority of private sector unions, has also called for supporters to rally. The labor leaders did not support the anti-Thaksin movement earlier because of wariness about the motives of media firebrand Sondhi Limthongkul, who led the initial demonstrations. Now that the movement has grown so far beyond Sondhi, they are ready to join. A number of labor unions and NGO have taken rooms in a hotel near Sanam Luang, so that demonstrators can have a place to shower and eat before returning to the field. A spokesman for the Teachers' Union has said that they would boycott and they would refuse to provide poll workers to assist with the vote.

5. (U) Thaksin has responded to the boycott threat uncharacteristically, by offering some compromise. He proposed delaying the date of the snap election, to give the opposition parties more time. "I'm willing to cooperate, but we all need to work under the constitution," he told the press on Tuesday. "I am ready to do anything, just tell me what you want," he said in an appeal to the boycotters. The opposition parties rejected the offer.

6. (SBU) So far, the opposition's boycott is popular with

the anti-Thaksin activists, but not doing well in the first polling information available. According to one polling organization, 45 percent of those surveyed in and around Bangkok do not agree with the boycott, 28 percent agree, and 26 percent are neutral. The opposition parties say that they will meet with their constituencies to explain their decision.

17. (C) TRT members are making threatening noise about the boycott, trying to label it as unconstitutional or illegal. They have implied that that it might be grounds to dissolve the parties. There does not appear to be any basis in law for these threats, however,

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